

**Testimony of**

**David Preziosi  
Executive Director  
Mississippi Heritage Trust**

**On behalf of**

**The Mississippi Heritage Trust**

**Before the**

**House Government Reform Subcommittee on  
Federalism and the Census**

**On**

**Historic Preservation vs. Katrina: What Role Should  
Federal, State and Local Governments Play in  
Preserving Historic Properties Affected by this  
Catastrophic Storm?**

**November 1, 2005**

**Testimony of David Preziosi,  
Executive Director – Mississippi Heritage Trust**

**Before the House Government Reform Subcommittee  
on Federalism and the Census**

**November 1, 2005**

Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Clay and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss what the federal, state, and local roles should be in the preservation of historic properties affected by Hurricane Katrina. I appreciate having the opportunity to speak on such an important topic and one that is central to my profession and my passion. My name is David Preziosi. I am the Executive Director of the Mississippi Heritage Trust (MHT).

The Mississippi Heritage Trust was founded in 1992 as the only statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the prehistoric and historic cultural resources of Mississippi. MHT has over 600 members in Mississippi and around the country. Our membership includes individuals, families, businesses, corporations, foundations, governmental entities, and non-profits. We work to achieve our mission through education and advocacy, as well as with hands on preservation work. MHT has assisted communities of all sizes with preservation issues, and is known for such key programs as Mississippi's 10 Most Endangered Historic Places list and the Mississippi Heritage Awards. We are also involved in education, holding preservation conferences

each year which focus on different themes. In addition we produce special workshops when needed on such topics as the use of historic tax credits for rehabilitation projects and cemetery preservation.

Mississippi was forever changed on August 29<sup>th</sup> when Katrina ripped through the state, destroying numerous historic resources and damaging countless others. In addition to those losses many museums and historical collections were also destroyed or severely damaged. Indeed it is not an overstatement to say that this is the greatest cultural catastrophe the state has ever faced. While the damage extended well inland, the three coastal counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson were the hardest hit and for the purposes of this hearing I will focus on these coastal communities. In those three counties there are 15 National Register Historic Districts, and 114 individually listed properties and sites on the National Register. Two National Historic Landmarks also stand on the coast, one being Beauvoir – Jefferson Davis’s last home - and the other the Rocket Propulsion Complex at the Stennis Space Center. Each one of the historic districts has suffered some form of loss or damage and approximately 22 individually listed buildings were lost with another 78 sustaining varying degrees of damage. Newly restored Beauvoir suffered extensive damage to the main house, and significant outbuildings on the grounds were washed away by the storm surge. The storm surge ripped through the first floor of the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library, carrying away priceless artifacts and historic treasures.

Both MHT and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) responded immediately to the storm. Our first priority was to attempt to determine the welfare of our friends and colleagues in the areas affected by Katrina. The status of the communications systems made it difficult to get through to people. After we found out the status about most of the people we knew we went to work checking on the status of our beloved historic landmarks which was also a difficult task. Communication systems again made it difficult to get through and we heard numerous rumors about different places, some of which were just that, and others that turned out to be true. On Friday September 2<sup>nd</sup> I and a member of the MDAH staff traveled to the coast with a reporter and photographer from the New York Times who were doing a story on the damage to historic properties. It was an eye-opening experience for all of us. Our first stop was to see Beauvoir of which we heard various stories of its level of damage and in some cases destruction. It was a surreal experience to drive down to the coast and see the damage to buildings and trees multiply as we got closer to the Gulf. As we reached Beauvoir we were astounded to find that the destruction to the main house and site was massive. Several historic outbuildings were completely gone and the wrap around gallery of the main house was torn off, causing gaping holes in the roof. There wasn't a trace of the gallery on the site, even the piers which used to support the porch deck. Live oak trees, many over 100 years old, were ripped from the ground and toppled over, and even the grounds looked like a barren wasteland. After investigating the damage to Beauvoir, we cautiously traveled further down the coast and saw more massive destruction to both historic and non-historic buildings alike. The 1850s Dantzler House was completely gone, with only a brick walkway and rubble to mark its former location. Other buildings

in Biloxi along the coast survived but were heavily damaged, the first floors being gouged by the storm surge pulling away front walls, columns, and porches. Porch roofs were floating above the ground with no supports, some second floors were being held up by no more than two exterior walls and some interior walls, while other houses were piles of ruins. After that trip it was determined that damage assessment was the priority to determine the extent of the damage across the Coast.

Four members of MHT's board of trustees live on the coast. While on the coast with the New York Times reporter I was able to confirm that three of them were safe and listened to their harrowing stories of surviving the storm. In Biloxi I had to climb a 10-foot pile of debris blocking the street to get to one board member who lives less than a block from the Gulf. I was very pleased to see her alive and her house still standing but damaged. Another board member from Biloxi had the first floor of his house flooded but he survived. I visited a third board member at her house in Turkey Creek - a historic African American neighborhood in North Gulfport. She told me how her house began flooding and by the time it got up to her shoulders she decided to swim out of the house and "up the street" to higher ground and relative safety on a neighbor's porch. Two weeks later I finally heard from the fourth board member living on the coast that she had lost her house while she was out of town during the storm.

Shortly after the first visit to the coast the SHPO staff and I began traveling down to the coast to do basic assessments in each of the coastal communities and to determine which properties needed further inspection. To date, 1200 structures have been assessed by a

staff of six plus me working long and grueling days traveling back and forth from Jackson each day due to the lack of lodging operational on the coast. The drive from Jackson to the Coast takes three hours each way. We covered the majority of the coast line, all of the National Register Historic Districts, and the majority of the individually listed structures. After those basic assessments we decided that the next step was to investigate the structural integrity of the properties most severely damaged to determine if and how the buildings could be stabilized and protected from further damage. Not having a structural engineer on the SHPO staff has slowed down this second phase of our response. We have been able to get some engineering assistance from volunteers coming in from outside of the state and from the only structural engineer working as a contractor for FEMA. But we don't know how long these volunteers will be willing to come help and the coordination of the volunteer teams has become burdensome in itself and has taken the attention of key staff members.

### **Federal Role**

The federal role in the preservation of historic properties damaged by Katrina should begin with additional technical support for FEMA in the field. We need more structural engineers and architects to help evaluate the condition of damaged properties listed on the National Register. Currently FEMA in Mississippi has only contracted with one structural engineer, a preservation consultant, and an architectural historian to be in the field. The three of them have to cover 72 miles of coast line, and 12 municipalities in three counties. This does not include the additional seven counties in the state also affected by Katrina but not on the coast. If we are to save as many of the damaged

historic structures as possible we need more structural engineers and architects to meet with property owners and local building officials. Those professionals can help evaluate the structures to determine if they are salvageable and to educate owners about how to temporarily stabilize their buildings.

Another federal role could be direct monies to help stabilize structures that have been damaged by Katrina. This can be contracted through the SHPO or other preservation organizations as they know the properties that are in need better than FEMA. This money could go to stabilizing the structures to give the owners more time to figure what can be done to save their properties and to work with insurance companies and local building officials. Many people are so overwhelmed with the damage to their buildings that having some resources to help buy them some time will hopefully prevent hasty decisions of demolishing properties that don't need to be demolished.

Due to the sheer size of the destruction caused by Katrina the federal government should also extend the 60 day limit on FEMA reimbursable debris removal. The time periods of only 60 days is not scaled to the level of the disaster creating an unnecessary rush to demolish historic structures.

Another thing needed at the federal level is to streamline FEMA regulations and make them simpler to understand and simpler for state and local agencies working with FEMA to get answers on the work they are doing. Reimbursable expenses have become a big

problem and it is not very clear what items can and can not be reimbursed. Different FEMA staff give different answers to the same reimbursement questions.

People in the areas affected by Katrina also need further clarification from FEMA about what FEMA will or will not be doing. Rumors are running rampant that FEMA will be knocking down any damaged houses even if the damage is not severe or even if it is missing a roof. Some of that misinformation is coming from FEMA contractors talking to the local people. However there needs to be a better public relations push to get correct information out to people and stop the rumors. While it seems a good idea to disseminate such information on the FEMA web site, directing people who do not have electricity or internet access or even a house to visit the web site only causes more frustration. To solve this problem, more information needs to be published in the local papers, and regular public meetings need to be held with FEMA representation to answer questions.

### **State Role**

The state role in the preservation of historic properties should be to provide additional technical assistance and services to historic property owners and municipalities with National Register properties in their boundaries. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History has already done a tremendous amount of work to do preliminary damage assessments to determine what areas are in critical need of further help. This was done without FEMA help as they were not ready to assist with assessments and determined that in Mississippi it was the role of the SHPO to provide this service whereas



in Louisiana they are hiring 20 to 30 architectural historians and architects to do this type of damage assessment.

For the more in-depth surveys that are needed to determine structural integrity of historic structures this is where we could use federal assistance to bring in structural engineers and architects, as mentioned earlier. These professionals could actually be hired on a temporary basis to work with the SHPO office from federally designated funds.

Another role is for the state Emergency Management Agency (MEMA in Mississippi) to work more closely with the SHPO and FEMA. We have had little support from MEMA regarding cultural resources and this lack of cooperation has hampered efforts of the FEMA staff. In many cases FEMA must wait for MEMA to ask for assistance before FEMA can proceed on certain items. If the state emergency agency is too busy to respond to cultural resources there needs to be a mechanism to override the requirement for FEMA to have to be asked by the state emergency management agency to get involved. The SHPO, as a state level governmental agency, should be able to ask for FEMA assistance in times of an emergency.

### **Local Role**

The local role is to work with the state and federal agencies to better protect local historic resources. Local governments need to give historic property owners the chance to evaluate their structures to see if they can be salvaged before they are tagged for removal in the clean-up process. Again, this is where structural engineers and architects, funded

by the federal government, could work with local building officials and local property owners to determine if historic structures can be repaired or if they really are too far gone to be salvaged and need to be taken down.

Local governments also need to keep their local preservation controls and ordinances in place and not change them until after the clean up is complete and it is determined what the entire community wants. It is crucial that the remaining historic structures are protected from alterations that will change their historic character which could affect already fragile National Register district status.

The local government, in partnership with the state, will also have to look at the changes that may need to be made to historic district boundaries due to the amount of historic properties that are gone and lack of historic resources to keep a National Register district with its current boundaries.

### **MHT's Role**

Our role at MHT has changed greatly due to Katrina and has put us in the forefront of trying to save the historic resources in the state damaged by Katrina. MHT is a staff of one and we have very limited resources so we can't do as much as we would like. We have changed from an advocacy and educational organization to one that is on ground trying to save as many historic buildings as possible. I have offered what services I can provide to assist MDAH's efforts. I have helped them with the damage assessment on the coast, and was present in meetings and on conference calls with them regarding

historic preservation. We have provided a united front in the effort to save our state's historic resources.

MHT has also been a source of information for the preservation world outside of Mississippi, for its membership, and for those just wanting to know about the status of historic properties in the area affected by Katrina. I have kept our web site up to date with information and pictures from visits to the coast and have answered numerous inquiries about the status of various buildings. The visits to our web site more than doubled from August to September. MHT has also become a source of information for the media and we have provided pictures and information to use in their publications and news reports.

We have also been working closely with our national partner the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) to take advantage of the resources they have to help Mississippi. They have been helpful in coordinating volunteers to come to our state and providing needed financial resources. We have now begun to hold public hearings on the coast in conjunction with MDAH and NTHP to help historic property owners deal with the damage to their properties. MHT and NTHP have also begun a Stabilization Pilot Program to begin the stabilization of up to 20 homes with a small pot of money. This is only a drop in the bucket of the number of properties in need of stabilization but at least it is a start and hopefully will generate more money from outside sources one we can prove what the money can do. MHT will work to save as many historic buildings as possible

damaged by Katrina for ever how long we have the resources to help and hopefully for as long as it takes.

### **Lessons Learned**

We would be remiss if we didn't look at the experience of Katrina as a learning experience for future disasters. The scope of this disaster was overwhelming for everyone and was no doubt what led to so many problems; however we discovered many things that could be handled better in the future or could be implemented to give people a better chance to save their historic resources. Some of those ideas include:

1. Develop better records on historic districts, or make sure they are up to date to help in the assessment of damaged properties. The records regarding historic properties and districts kept at the local level were in many cases destroyed or are missing so multiple copies should be made and stored in a central safe location that the SHPO can access. Do more investigation into potentially eligible national Register Districts and properties. During damage assessments we found many potentially eligible district areas, many in lower-income areas.
2. Reevaluate FEMA flood maps as pre-storm FEMA maps misled property owners to think they did not need flood insurance. Now that the majority of the damage is being determined to have been flood-related people who have insurance are not being covered for the damage if they didn't have flood insurance.

3. Develop a comprehensive coastal heritage recovery plan in case of future disasters. This plan should include clearly defined roles of the federal, state, and local entities in protecting and saving historic resources.
4. Identify sources of immediate money for stabilization of privately owned buildings - grants and tax credits are too slow to provide crucial stabilization to prevent the buildings from deteriorating further or completely collapsing before money can get there. This may be in the form of an emergency recovery fund that is already set up and can be accessed when a disaster happens.
5. Prepare federal, state, and local agencies for similar levels of structural damage, as agencies were unprepared for this aspect of the disaster. No previous disaster, except for the hurricane that struck Galveston in 1900, has had this level of structural damage.
6. Make sure that areas that are not in the media spotlight get the proper federal and private resources necessary. The focus on New Orleans has drawn public and private funds away from Mississippi, which was much harder hit. Our buildings are barely standing and structurally damaged whereas most of the buildings flooded by Katrina in New Orleans are at least still standing. Even though we were much harder hit in Mississippi, Louisiana received FEMA Cultural Resource staff members more quickly and more of them than in Mississippi. We have a much larger geographic area damaged by Katrina to cover and much more severe structural damage to assess yet we only have a handful of FEMA Cultural Resource staff.

7. The number, size, and intensity of major Gulf hurricanes in the last 18 months points to the need for a federal program to improve survivability of structures on the Gulf Coast, including mitigation approaches that will encourage retention and strengthening of historic buildings. Such a program could begin with pre-storm mapping and documentation of National Register districts and National Register - eligible structures so that mitigation work can be prioritized, and so that in future disasters, recovery efforts can be streamlined.

It has been absolutely heartbreaking to see so many of our beloved historic landmarks on the coast gone or in ruins. Whole sections of historic districts are missing and numerous historic structures are barely hanging on with severe damage compromising their future. Much work lies ahead if we are to save those historic places that are important to the fabric and character of Mississippi. All levels of government - federal, state, and local - must work together and form partnerships that strive to give every effort and assistance possible to those who own properties listed on the National Register. These National Register properties which are important enough to be recognized by the federal government as having local, state, or national significance should be worthy of some additional assistance to save them. We must not let Katrina take any more historic structures through a lack of effort or coordination on the part of the different levels of government than she has already destroyed. When you have pieces of your historic fabric ripped from you so violently and quickly it is important that we do all that we can to save the remaining historic structures that survived the wrath of Katrina to retain a small portion of the historic character of the coast.